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HARVESTING SUCCESS

Charter Schools in Rural America

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INTRODUCTION

"The charter school revolution has largely bypassed rural America and its students."
– Terry Ryan, President, Idaho Charter School Network

Approximately one in four public school students attends school in a rural community, accounting for more than 11 million students in total (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Poverty, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and homelessness among rural teens are as common as they are among urban teens, if not more so (Van Gundy, 2006). Low-income rural students are more likely than average to pursue two-year degrees rather than four-year degrees and less likely than average to attend any college at all (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2013).

When serving similarly-challenged urban communities, high-performing urban charter schools have been successful in realizing dramatic gains in student achievement outcomes for low-income, minority, and other at-risk students. In a 2015 study, the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes at Stanford University (CREDO) surveyed 41 urban regions and found that urban charter schools achieve greater student success in both math and reading compared to traditional urban schools. This amounts to 40 and 28 additional days respectively, of learning growth in math and reading (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015). These successes in urban areas, however, have not translated to the widespread growth of charter schools in rural communities. As of 2010, rural charter schools enrolled only 2% of rural students while their urban counterparts enrolled 6% of urban students. Although one third of U.S. public schools are rural, only 16% of the charter school sector is rural. Furthermore, among the charter schools across rural America, 85% are located just outside of more populated areas (known as rural fringe areas) and only 15% serve students in remote rural areas (Stuit, 2012). Nevertheless, the flexible and autonomous nature of charter schools may make them an ideal vehicle to address the challenges of rural America. As one report summarizes:

"Student achievement results in our nation's most remote areas look very similar to those in our inner cities – heartbreakingly low. Yet while urban families increasingly have access to a variety of school options, including charter schools, many rural families have just a single

> *school option… The 2011-12 federal Schools and Staffing Survey indicated that 74 percent of students in urban schools had the option of enrolling in another nearby school but that only 21 percent of rural students had that same ability. Rural families too often have just a single school option.*" (Smarick, 2014)

Despite these similarities between urban and rural issues, urban charter schools have seen faster growth than rural charter schools. One reason for the difference in growth rates is that legislative support for charter schools has traditionally been harder to find in rural areas. The seven remaining states without charter school legislation are predominantly rural, with six of them on the Census Bureau's list of the 15 most predominantly rural states (Bishop, 2012).

Out of the 15 most predominantly rural states, three have passed charter school legislation only in the past two years, and four appear at the bottom of the National Alliance's Model Law rankings (The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). Cumulatively, the 15 most rural states account for only 122 of the nation's 6,440 charter schools as of 2015.

Those states noted as being at the bottom of the Model Law ranking are there largely due to significant restrictions on the extent to which the charter school option is available across the state. For example, until recently, Oklahoma's charter school law only allowed charter schools in Tulsa and Oklahoma City, accounting for just 4% of districts and clearly excluding any rural areas (Mullins, 2015).

One reason for this slow adoption is the perception that charter schools draw away already limited resources from traditional public schools. From a 2014 Education Week article, Kai A. Schafft, an associate professor of education at Pennsylvania State University, notes:

> *"The charter school advocates present [rural charter schools] mostly in terms of 'this is a good thing because it results in more choice,' but the problem with that argument is that the choice comes at a potentially significant cost, and that is the institutional undermining of the option that already exists.*" (Ash, 2014)

One rural governor stated that authorizing charter schools "may leave the public schools in a much worse position than we've got them in now" (Mattise, 2015). Leaders of other rural states have expressed similar sentiments. Nevertheless, inspired by the success that many communities have realized as a result of charter schools, Alabama recently passed legislation permitting charter school establishment (Ryan, 2014).

As recent research on understanding the challenge and success models of rural charter schools is lacking, the National Charter School Resource Center compiled this paper to share best practices with charter school leaders and sector supporters. Echoing our concern, Scott Shirley, the director of the KIPP Delta charter school network, cites a lack of successful examples as the greatest barrier to building and expanding rural charter schools (National Charter School Resource Center, 2010). The spotlight schools mentioned in this white paper are commendable examples of ways to meet the needs of students and their communities.

Section I of this paper explores the challenges faced by rural charter schools. In Section II, we provide examples of effective and innovative strategies high-impact rural charter schools are using to overcome the challenges presented in Section I. We hope that these schools will provide sector leaders with successful examples of rural charter schools, and inspire leaders to expand to other rural areas.

SECTION I: Challenges Faced by Rural Charter Schools

Beyond the legislative and political struggles that charter schools face in rural communities, our research has identified the following notable challenges that commonly affect rural charter schools in states that authorize them:

- A lack of diverse and qualified human capital,
- The high cost of transporting students over large distances, and
- Difficulty in securing and maintaining facilities.

To an extent, all charter schools face the same challenges that rural charter schools encounter. However, the remote geography and sparse resources of rural areas make these challenges more acute for rural charter schools.

Human Capital – Enhance Recruitment Efforts or Build Local Talent

Human capital is a well-documented concern in rural public schools (Stuit, 2012). Without the natural talent pipelines and labor pools of larger population centers to provide a ready supply of leadership talent and staff, rural schools either have to enhance their recruitment and retention efforts or grow and foster local talent. To recruit and retain talent, rural schools must overcome the perceptions of geographic isolation, limited housing options, and low salaries for current and potential leaders and teachers (Hammer, 2005). In 2007, for example, the National Center for Education Statistics found that the average rural teacher earned $4,600 less than the average teacher in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Employers attempt to justify lower salaries for rural employees with the lower cost of living in rural areas; however, schools rarely take into account the hidden costs of residing in a rural area. The lack of suitable housing near the school, public transportation infrastructure, and professional and academic opportunities for partners and children can add up to significant expenses for teachers and administrators.

Beyond financial concerns, there are other issues that face prospective staff members. For example, teachers and administrators recruited to rural areas might fear for their long-term career prospects. In case of job loss, employees are left with few other career prospects in the region, as other schools in rural areas are few.

Even where there are locals interested in becoming teachers and administrators, prohibitive costs of professional development and skill-set limitations can inhibit a single school's ability to support the professional growth of their staff.

Transportation – Costly and Mandatory

Unlike urban charter schools, rural charter schools often enroll students from a wide geographic area to meet enrollment targets. A 2001 study found that 85% of rural students spend more than 30 minutes on the school bus each way to get to and from school (Howley, 2001). With the extended time spent on buses, the cost of transportation is much higher in rural areas. A 2011 analysis of spending and staffing patterns in the western region of the U.S. found that the transportation expenditure of districts in remote rural areas is almost 4.5 times as much as that of districts in cities (Levin, 2011).

Like their urban and suburban counterparts, rural charter schools expand their enrollment base by offering transportation to their students. However, running a bus service can be complicated and expensive for a charter school if the local school district does not provide busing or subsidize the costs. While charter schools in urban areas might forego offering transportation, rural charter schools are less likely to have that option. Although providing transportation is critical in rural areas that lack public transportation infrastructure, it can be financially overwhelming for rural charter schools.

Facilities – Limited Facilities, Limited Funds

With fewer buildings available, finding space to operate a rural charter school can be even more challenging than in urban and suburban areas. While urban charter schools may be able to access unused public or parochial school buildings to house students, such real estate is not as frequently available in rural communities (Sazon, 2011). With fewer facilities, rural charter schools often consider constructing their own buildings (Stuit, 2012), which require external financing.

However, sources of external funding are restricted. Most states do not provide facility funding assistance to charter schools, and charter schools have limited options for raising the capital required to build new schools or improve existing ones. Some options include private capital markets, public bond initiatives, and nonprofit fundraising. While a few charter schools have benefitted from fundraising and philanthropic donations to acquire a building (Smarick, 2014), rural charter school leaders have fewer opportunities to interact with and appeal to major philanthropists, and traditional lenders are not always aware of the schools. To elaborate on this lending challenge, Jane Ellis from the Center for Community Self-Help adds:

> *"Collateral values tend to be low in rural areas as comparables are non-existent and resell values are low, which makes lending more difficult as most lenders have loan-to-value limits. Moreover, if a public charter school borrower failed, there are less potential users or buyers of an empty school facility as the demand for charter school seats is low in rural areas."*

Rural charter schools can also secure funding through federal and state grant programs geared toward facilities and community development. For example, the USDA Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant program provides support to rural community development. To date, the program has awarded more that 200 charter schools a total of $510 million (Abraham, 2014). The challenge is that charter schools need to secure community support to qualify for these grants. According to Jane Ellis, securing support is not easy, given the perception of charter schools in a rural setting and the opposition from local zoning authorities and politicians.

SECTION II: Emerging Solutions and Approaches to Rural Charter Education

The following highlighted schools have used innovative practices to tackle the inherent challenges of opening and operating a rural charter school. In some cases, rural charter school leaders have extensively integrated the community into their schools, leading to the transformation of the entire community.

Spotlight 1: A "Grow-Your-Own" Human Capital Approach at the Upper Carmen Charter School

Carmen, Idaho, is nestled between two national forests on the border with Montana. There, couple Sue and Jim Smith took advantage of Idaho's 1997 charter school law to open the one-class K-3 Upper Carmen Charter School. The reading curriculum was designed by Ms. Smith, who was a master educator and had taught in private and public schools for over two decades. She wanted every kindergartner to read by Thanksgiving of their first year in school. Today, Upper Carmen serves 86 students in grades K-8 and employs six teachers and several instructional aides. It is known as one of the most remote schools in America, with students traveling on average 25-30 miles a day to attend class (Ryan, 2015). Despite the challenges, Upper Carmen Charter School is distinguished by its successful efforts to retain instructional staff and to foster enthusiasm for the school's mission.

The location of the Upper Carmen Charter School makes it difficult to attract and retain highly qualified teaching staff. Upper Carmen Charter School has responded to the challenge with deliberate efforts to draw from the human capital in its local community. The board of trustees assembled by the Smiths includes local community leaders and ranchers. To draw local talent, the Smiths employed their neighbors who, although they were not certified, possessed instructional skills. Staff with roots in the Carmen community fosters a greater sense of ownership over the school's mission. Local teachers can better understand and respond to the needs of the students and their families.

To further close the gap in recruitment and tend to all administrative and academic functions, the Smiths assigned multiple tasks to staff members: teachers instruct, serve lunch, clean, and assist in other school operations. The principal teaches a full course load, runs the school

operations, and manages the school transportation system. An "all hands on deck" mentality permeates every school day.

Despite limited staff expertise, the Upper Carmen School has found success in skill and talent development. The founders themselves train employees and empower them with tools and systems. Several of the school's most successful teachers started out as instructional aides and received in-house professional development from other teachers to prepare them to take on full-time classroom teaching.

The efforts to recruit and develop staff proved fruitful for student achievement. Upper Carmen Charter School is now one of the top 10% of Idaho schools and maintains a waiting list of about 40 students (Ryan, 2015).

Spotlight 2: Turnarounds through a Project-Based Approach at the Walton 21st Century Rural Life Center and Elkton High School

The Walton 21st Century Rural Life Center was established in 2007 as part of a conversion effort. When shrinking enrollment sparked a fear of closure and worries of negative impact on the surrounding community, the Newton School District in Kansas sought Charter School Program funds to convert Walton, their smallest and most remote school, into a public charter school. The launch of the Walton 21st Century Rural Life Center centered on incorporating agriculture into the school's curricula. As a school responding to its farming community's needs, Walton not only realized a growth in enrollment, but prospered with more than 90 percent of its students surpassing both math and reading grade levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Superintendent John Morton explains, "We wanted to find a way to take an agriculture theme and make it work, to help our kids become more effective 21st century citizens." To ensure the success of the program, Walton had to make sure everyone, from staff members to households, was on board and up to speed with the new curricula. After orienting the team and building the classrooms, Walton started their project-based, hands-on learning. For example, students work with farm animals, gather and package eggs, sell produce, plant vegetables, and use technology to research how to use wind energy. Walton teaches basic math and reading skills through real-life projects. By teaching students how they would use these skills, learning becomes easier and more engaging.

Walton takes its students on field trips to local farms to see first-hand the outcomes of their education. Through project-based learning, Walton is not seeking to build an entire work force of farmers to serve their community; instead, the school's leaders hope to instill transferrable skills and grow problem solvers who can invest in researching and executing on their interests. Natise Vogt, principal at Walton Rural Life Center, added: "Kids can be excited about learning if what they are learning makes sense to them."

Similar to Walton's story, Elkton High School in Oregon was facing enrollment and funding declines until Superintendent Mike Hughes converted the school into a charter school (thereafter renamed to Elkton Charter School) and reestablished its curricula and systems.

During the conversion process, Elkton sought a new funding stream of federal funds and extended geographic boundaries to revive the school.

At the onset of the conversion, some families were skeptical of the idea due to the lack of familiarity with charter schools. To address their concerns, Hughes sent board and community members to nearby charter schools to observe their operations. Shortly after, everyone was onboard and supportive of the transition. In the spirit of Walton's philosophy and, given the close proximity of the school to the Umpqua River, Elkton built a natural resources-focused academy. Students study soil samples, mold, fungi, leaves, and trees; they also go on exploration field trips to estuaries. Similar to Walton, project-based learning at Elkton provides students with hands-on, real-life experiences that help them serve and prosper within their local community (Melton, 2010).

Spotlight 3: BEST Program in Colorado Enables Crestone Charter School to Build its Facility

In 2008, Colorado established BEST, Building Excellent Schools Today, which offers income from the state lottery and School Trust Lands to cover schools' capital expenses. Colorado also created the Charter Matching Moneys Loan Program, which provides loans to qualified schools to meet required matches under BEST (Colorado Department of Education, 2011). Giving priority to needier schools and those in the worst facilities, the program has assisted many rural schools in Colorado. One example of a rural school that benefited from this program is Crestone Charter School.

Crestone is the second poorest town in the state and is located in sparsely-populated Saguache County. Crestone Charter School opened in 1996 and now enrolls 96 students, most of whom travel more than 12 miles to attend school. Crestone Charter School is the primary K-12 school serving the area's students; the traditional district school is about 13 miles away. The area's average household income is $29,200, which is almost half of the national average of $51,939 and slightly higher than the poverty limit of $23,364 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Despite the area's high poverty rates, student scores on statewide examinations at Crestone Charter School consistently surpass state averages in math and reading. Crestone's 2013 graduation rate was 94% compared to 77% statewide (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). The state of Colorado recently named it one of the top three schools in the state (Ryan, 2015).

When Crestone opened its doors, it served students in portable trailers. The school now operates in a multimillion-dollar, green energy-certified facility. Crestone, a charter school in a geographically-isolated area known for its lack of water supply and harsh winters, was awarded a BEST grant and built a $9M school building with matching revenue generated by taxpayers.

Although the state capital construction program is largely intended for school districts, Crestone was able to gain access to BEST funds by combining its strong track record with impressive local community support. The BEST program includes a process to calculate a dollar figure that school districts or charter schools must provide as their local "match" to any

state grant for capital assistance. Generally, school districts obtain their requisite matching funds through a locally approved tax increase, while charter schools have traditionally relied on fundraising and accumulated savings to make their match. Crestone, however, was able to utilize a separate Colorado statute allowing charter schools, under certain circumstances, to get a charter school-specific tax increase on their local ballot, which Crestone did and voters supported.

Obtaining the funding required overcoming substantial hostility from the Moffat district and the ranching neighbors. Families with generational connections to the district resisted the idea of change. In response, Crestone, along with supporters, advocated hard to replace the entire Moffat Board with a new, progressive school board that supported the existence of Crestone. Building on this momentum, Crestone extended its community involvement by using the facility to host community events and activities. District and community support allowed the project to be completed successfully, and today Crestone's charter school is the social and economic heart of its community (Ryan, 2015).

Spotlight 4: Reducing Transportation Costs with Four-Day School Week in Idaho

The four-day school week first started in New Mexico in the 1970s. An energy crisis caused transportation and utility costs to rapidly increase (Salzman). The National School Board Association estimates that about 100 school districts in 17 states are operating on a four-day-a-week schedule today. The vast majority of participating schools are located in rural areas (Gaines, 2008) in districts serving fewer than 1,000 students (Donis-Keller, 2009). Idaho, a predominantly rural state, currently has 48 charter schools. Seven of these charter schools are operating on a four-day school week. Examples include the Village Charter School in Boise, the Upper Carmen Charter School in Carmen, and the North Idaho STEM Charter Academy in Rathdrum.

Schools operating on the four-day school week typically lengthen the hours of their school day. The North Idaho STEM Charter Academy operates from 8am to 4pm. Longer days allow them to reach the 990 hours of instruction required by the state while eliminating more than twenty school days. Moving to a four-day school week has led to a 20% reduction in transportation and food-service costs. Savings come mostly from fuel, oil, and salaries for hourly employees and school bus drivers. Idaho charter schools that have moved to a four-day school week report that staff attendance increases and money is saved on substitute-teacher costs (Idaho State Department of Education).

Schools operating on a four-day school week sometimes use the fifth day to engage faculty and staff in professional development. Because the school building remains in use, these schools do not see a substantial reduction in utility costs; however, the students and community benefit from the dedicated time to build human capital. In these cases, schools have the opportunity to better equip their teachers to serve vulnerable populations (Donis-Keller, 2009).

Spotlight 5: Beyond Textbooks (BT): Supplementing with Technology

Difficulties securing adequate facilities and building human capital have caused some rural charter schools to turn to technology to provide instructional materials for students and staff. Unlike cyber charter schools that completely eschew a brick-and-mortar presence in favor of online learning, many rural schools use technology to supplement in-house resources.

Serving more than 12,000 students, Arizona's Vail school district is one of the largest in the predominantly rural Pima County (Vail School District, 2014). Benson Unified School District, by contrast, is one of Arizona's smallest districts. Located in a rural corner of the state, it serves approximately 1,200 students in traditional district schools, a virtual school, and a charter high school, San Pedro Valley High School. An open-source textbook program called Beyond Textbooks (BT), created by the Vail school district, has allowed the Benson school district to serve the community through a diverse portfolio of schools. Staff have incorporated common planning times throughout the week for the program and to discuss how to best map the BT standards to the core English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies classes.

In addition to serving as a set of Common Core-aligned digital textbooks for students, BT provides teachers and other school staff with access to teacher-developed instructional resources and comprehensive data tools. BT has emerged as a provider of professional development, which is a considerable advantage for small rural schools that may lack the infrastructure and human capital to provide opportunities for teacher collaboration (Ryan, 2014).

Vail Public Schools Superintendent, Calvin Baker, praises BT as a way for rural schools to address common operational challenges. Baker says, "There is no way they can do it all. There is too much politics and too much to do – finance issues, operational issues, personnel issues. It is just physically impossible to do it all." With BT, districts can cut operational costs, while simultaneously providing support for teachers and giving students access to rigorous curriculum materials.

BT has benefited rural charter schools like San Pedro Valley High School by giving them access to a cutting edge, nationally-recognized educational program. Benson Unified School District has recuperated 94 percent of per pupil textbook costs, reducing textbook costs to nearly zero. BT is beginning to attract the interest of schools outside of Arizona. Idaho and Wyoming recently partnered with BT, and more rural states and districts are expected to join as well.

SECTION III: Conclusion

Since 1991, charter schools have proven adaptive and responsive to a diverse array of community needs across the nation. As illustrated in this paper, the benefits of the charter school model are not limited to the nation's population centers but can also be a vehicle for innovation and choice in traditionally rural communities.

Beyond the need for choice, charter schools have opened in some rural areas to combat some of the challenges specific to rural education. Charter schools have the flexibility to introduce innovative operating models and implement new instructional strategies. Therefore, charter schools continue to be promising alternatives to traditional public schools in rural areas, and that apparent promise should inspire more research into potential innovation to further improve outcomes for rural students and communities.

> *"Charter schools provide an incredibly important choice so that we have different ways to meet the needs of different children. We owe it to the child to give them that choice. They need the same access to choices that urban children have."*
> *– Michael Hayes, Director, Crestone Charter School*

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